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For the Righteous shall Inherit the Land - Short story

The ship was half an hour early despite taking off about twenty minutes late. Don wondered why they didn't schedule flights for shorter times if they could go that fast, but his mind soon drifted in anticipation of the tour among the wonders of Europa. It was a small group of only seven, and that included Ms Trudder, the guide. Don was sitting behind an elderly couple, next to a bald guy called Ch- something. The rear seats were occupied by two younger women.

'I cannot wait to see the palace,' whispered the frail voice of the old lady a bit too loudly. 'They say it's beautiful.'

The husband could hardly utter what sounded a habitual 'uhm' when the guide stood up to speak. The floor of the ship shook violently when she tried to untangle her legs from the coils of black cable leading to the microphone.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' she began, crackling like an old radio. 'In about five minutes, we'll begin our descent to New Gibraltar, the spaceport of Europa. Before landing, I'd like to say a couple of words about what to expect and how to behave during the tour.

'As you may have read in our brochure, Europe was inhabited by some intelligent life form just recently, until about four thousand years ago. We at the Europe for All Group do everything to preserve and present this heritage to you. We are here to spend about six hours on this moon, during which we will visit the Sphere, the Library, and, perhaps most importantly, the Palace and what we call the Great Exhibition.

'In order to help us with the preservation, and for the sake of future visitors who'd like to enjoy the sights just as much as you do, we ask you not to use flash holography or odography on the sites. The diving suits are in the front of the ship, and I will be happy to assist anyone with them once the autopilot has given the all clear. Any questions?'

'How many people are on Europa?' asked Chad (as that was his real name).

'The exploration centre is closed for the summer, so I'm afraid it'll be us only.'

A harsh beep sounded.

'Oh, we're landing,' Ms Trudder said, and quickly sat down. 'Please fasten your seatbelts, and remain seated until I tell you it's safe to stand up.'

The landing was like the whole journey: shaky. The ship touched the ground with a jerk and swayed to the left. The autopilot hesitated a bit, then shrugged its electric shoulders, and shut down the engines. Ms Trudder worked herself out of the chair, and apologized. 'I'm sorry for the awkward landing, but now it's perfectly safe to leave your seats and prepare yourselves for the tour of your lives!'

Don's enthusiasm faded a bit in front of the prospect of a perhaps too homely tour with a handful of people only, but the girls chatted happily, and he even managed to introduce himself to them while they were squeezing themselves into the dangerously undersized black rubber diving suits. The one with the curly blond hair was Chastity; Sarah had short brown hair and eyes that seemed to know it all.

The ship landed, as Ms Trudder readily explained, on the outer crust of Europa. In the middle of the spaceport was a pressure-protected gravitational pool, or, in simpler terms, a hole with a lid, through which they were to enter the underground ocean, where the Europeans once lived. It was a bit difficult to get used to the high pressure (Augusta, the old lady, almost turned back from the compression chamber), but the sight that greeted them inside the crust was enthralling. There were buildings erected upside down on the inner surface of the crust. Don tried swimming with his head downwards, towards the centre of the moon, and Ms Trudder suggested that they all do that, as apparently this was how Europans had interpreted their world. The rays of the Sun filtered through the ice and sand that made up the crust, and made it glow in a dark blue hue. It was on this ground that the simple buildings of some greyish stone stood under a pitch black mass of water.

The small group worked their way towards the city. Augusta's husband, who made himself known as John, was surprisingly good at swimming, which he attributed to his experience in the War of Lights. Charlotte and Sarah coped less well, and sometimes they all had to wait for them to catch up. Don tried to encourage them through the radio that was integrated in the masks. Chad apparently wasn't really interested in his fellow travellers, and now and then disappeared completely in the darkness.

'We should all make sure that we can see the others and that they can see us at all times,' Ms Trudder said, swinging her lamp wildly. 'The water is usually calm, but there may be strong currents now and then.'

But they reached the buildings without any further difficulty. They swam past what seemed single-storey rock dwellings separated by wide streets.

'The way of life of Europans is still a mystery to us,' Ms Trudder started again. 'While these buildings seem like houses, they are actually slabs of rock with small spheres carved into them. Few tools or objects have been found inside, and the walls are not decorated at all.'

They were heading toward a large spherical construction in the centre of the city. The buildings gradually became higher and larger with more and more openings and abstract carvings. On top of the sphere, a large flickering neon sign from one of the previous millennia advertised the services of the Europa for All Group.

Ms Trudder escorted the small group inside.

'Welcome to the Sphere! This place was completely empty when the first expedition to Europa discovered it about 200 Earth years ago, so we decided to put our visitors' centre here. You may notice the faded carvings on the outside: these run around the sphere, but aren't really varied. If you saw a little bit of it, you've seen it all.'

Inside, there was a long table full of waterproof flyers and brochures, some chairs and free strawberry protein drinks. The interior was illuminated by an uncertain light, and a generator was humming in the background.

'What do you think this building was used for?' Sarah asked. 'Look at the wear on the stone. It seems to have been in use for a long time.'

Ms Trudder gave her a cold look. 'Archaeological data tell us that this place had been empty for centuries. Probably the construction was abandoned, and the building was left to the mercy of the elements.'

'A ghost sphere in the middle of the city?' Don asked in disbelief.

'Of course it'd been empty. That's how -'

But Ms Trudder apparently had enough. 'Ladies and gentlemen, if you've taken a good look on the carvings and are done with the refreshments, let's go outside.'

The construction called the library was about two hundred yards from the sphere. From the outside, it was an almost perfect cube with a small opening in the exact middle of one of the sides. The entrance was clearly inaccessible from the ground, which became darker and darker as the day turned into evening. The interior, dimly lit by a couple of mine lamps hanging on a zigzag of electric wires, seemed at first to be a kind of dungeon. It was covered by six-foot-long spikes, and, in the middle, a strange machinery was suspended from the ground.

'Don't touch the spikes, please,' boomed Ms Trudder's voice over the radio. They all turned to see what was happening, but it was only Chad who reached out to feel how sharp they actually were.

'They're made of stone, sweetie,' he answered back. Ms Trudder didn't take her narrow eyes off him. 'Spot on. You ought to be on the archaeologist team.'

'They're sharp as a needle. Might have been used to impale bad people.'

'One more reason to get away from them, then.'

The seconds ticked away slowly in the awkward silence. Finally Chad turned and joined the group, and Ms Trudder donned the mask of the jovial hostess once again.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Europan library. What you see around yourselves are the Europan equivalents of shelves. These sharp spikes were used to store innumerable coils–books detailing events of Europan history and cataloguing properties and belongings. Most of the coils have been removed and transferred to our language laboratories, but some are left here so that you can see how the library functioned.’

And indeed, at the bottom of some of the spikes around the entrance hid one or two yellowish-greyish coils of some strange rubber-like ribbon.

‘I’m sorry,’ started Augusta, although no one was actually speaking. ‘Following up on what the young man–Chad, am I right?–the young man said, how were the Europans actually using these things? They couldn’t possibly get to the coils at the bottom without hurting themselves.’

Ms Trudder opened her mouth to answer, but Sarah spoke first.

‘Maybe they weren’t like us,’ she said. ‘I mean like they didn’t have firm bodies or something.’

‘Yes,’ Ms Trudder said. ‘Yes, that’s right. You seem to know a lot about this place, Miss –’

‘Brown. I – I have read a few books about the moon.’

‘Very good. Hope you enjoyed them.’

Then Ms Trudder went on to demonstrate, with a false coil, how the reading machine worked in the middle of the cube. It looked like a primitive version of a tape recorder with the ribbon unreeling from one of the spikes and winding up on the other. The spikes themselves were connected by a narrow band and rotated by a paddle wheel.

‘It’s got no handles. Nothing but the paddles,’ John observed. ‘How were they operating this thing?’

Ms Trudder didn’t even bother to try to reply.

‘I think they whirled the water, and that moved the paddle wheel,’ Sarah said, swimming closer to show how.

‘Don’t touch the object, please,’ said Ms Trudder’s voice over the radio. Sarah pulled back her hand.

‘But why wouldn’t they just turn it?’ John wondered, half aloud.

‘I don’t know,’ Sarah said softly, and smiled at him.

After the disappointment of the dark sphere and the even darker library, the palace turned out to be something actually worth visiting. An array of pigeonholes interconnected by narrow tubes carved into the stone, its interior spaces alternated between miniature nooks and awe-inspiring halls like those in dripstone caves. It also boasted the only specially adapted underwater toilets under the crust, installed by the Europa for All Group over two conveniently placed holes in one of the largest rooms, which also featured a large and surprisingly colourful stone bowl with some candies in hermetic wrappings left in it for the visitors. The group greeted the toilets, and all except

Sarah gladly took advantage of them. As for her, she seemed concerned over their placement.

'Are you sure it was a good idea?'

'I'm sorry, young lady, what was a good idea?'

'Putting the toilets there. I mean... This seems to be an important room. I'm not sure the Europans would be too happy to see...'

'The Europans are no longer here, dear,' Ms Trudder stated calmly. 'And there are scientists researching this building, who I'm sure would know where to put the loo.'

The others, however, didn't let themselves distracted by the guide's lack of hospitality. They admired the intricate carvings and the colourful lights playing on the surface of the half-transparent walls.

But perhaps the most interesting part of the palace was to be found in a wing that extended to the next avenue. A cylinder built of a stone as black as the dead of the night, it contained rooms and rooms filled with tools, vessels, household items and jewellery of the Europan heritage.

'Welcome to the Great Exhibition, hosted in the northern wing of the Palace,' boomed Ms Trudder.

'This is beautiful,' Augusta said to her husband as she stopped to see two shiny droplets. 'Margaret used to have earrings like these, dear, you remember?'

Ms Trudder continued. 'Perhaps the most intriguing thing about the Exhibition is not even the array of wonderful items on display, but its history. The objects here haven't been collected during excavations and expeditions on Europa. The exhibition was found just in the way you see it today by the first people who arrived here.'

'What, the Europans brought here everything they had and just left?' asked Chad.

'Or died,' added Chastity.

'You can't be serious.'

Ms Trudder looked at them a bit condescendingly. 'I told you it was the most intriguing thing.'

Although the things exhibited were interesting indeed, swimming from one place to another during the last couple of hours began to take its toll. Augusta and Chastity chatted away sitting, upside down, on one of the great things that resembled inverted vases, and Don wandered aimlessly among some gadgets that were like leaf blowers from the stone age. They were all tired and felt relieved when Ms Trudder announced the end of the tour.

They left the palace and started swimming out of the city, when Sarah realized that Chad was missing.

'OK, who saw him for the last time?' John asked.

‘Why–he asked that question about the exhibition just like minutes ago,’ his wife replied.

‘That was more like an hour ago.’

‘An hour! Good heavens! What could’ve happened to him?’ Augusta began to panic and clung on her husband as if someone was attacking them. Fortunately, Ms Trudder turned out to be a professional in handling such situations. She ordered everyone back into the lobby of the exhibition, and asked Don to help her search the palace.

‘Radio checks every thirty seconds,’ she ordered. ‘If there’s no answer, we head back here immediately.’

John also volunteered to help.

‘You’re not going anywhere!’ shrieked Augusta.

‘Don’t be silly, dear. The whole place’s empty.’

Charlotte and Sarah tried to calm Augusta down as the trio swam back into the main wing.

It was Don who found Chad. He was in the toilet room, lying on the ceiling. He was breathing steadily and appeared to be asleep. Don shook him gently first. Then a little more violently the second time.

‘What the hell?’ Chad asked as he woke up.

‘I guess I’m asking that,’ Don replied. ‘What were you doing here?’

‘Is he all right?’ asked Ms Trudder’s voice over the radio. ‘Where are you?’

‘I think he is. We’re where the toilets are.’

‘It figures. You guys need help?’

‘No,’ Chad said weakly, pushing himself off the ceiling.

‘Good. Meet you in the lobby.’ A click announced that Ms Trudder finished the conversation.

‘You sure you’re all right?’ Don asked, guiding Chad out of the room. ‘You just fell asleep?’

‘I can’t remember how I got here. I remember drifting, drinking a lot of water and feeling sick.’ With that, he belched out a bit of water, and swam out of the room. Don had just entered the tube connecting the room with the rest of the palace, when he heard a rumbling noise.

‘What on earth is that?’

‘I heard that,’ Chad said calmly, ‘I’d heard that before. Right before I ended up here.’

‘But what is it?’

‘No idea.’ Chad turned and started to swim toward the exhibition. ‘It may’ve come for you this time.’

Having got out of the city, the small group ascended gradually and spent what seemed hours in the compression chamber to avoid complications. The autopilot was already waiting for them, with the engines running, as they were

behind schedule. But they hardly fastened the seat belts, getting ready for take-off, when the ship swayed violently and almost keeled over.

'What's going on?' Chastity cried. Augusta was praying silently, and Chad sat erect, with a face paler than the distant Sun.

'Unstable landing detected; emergency take-off,' announced the autopilot, and they shoot up into space. A second later, a deafening thunder came from below their feet.

'This is nine seven zero! We're hit! We're hit! Rocks are hitting against us!' Ms Trudder talked into the microphone. 'EFAG, can you hear me?'

'We can hear you. We're waiting for the autopilot to sign in.'

'Where do those rocks come from? Are we in a meteorite cloud?' John asked.

'Hardly, we're too close to Europa,' Sarah said. In that instant, a clang sounded from the back, and the emergency siren began to wail.

'Malfunction in the left engine,' announced the autopilot, and the ship rolled to its side. As the Europan horizon appeared in the windows, it suddenly became clear what had happened. They were sitting on top of an enormous geyser with pieces of the outer crust flying in every direction.

'Nine seven zero, can you hear me?' said the woman apparently from EFAG.

'Yes,' Ms Trudder replied, with a mixture of controlled fear and relief.

'The left engine is out. Everything else is okay. You can make it home.'

The ship accelerated, and they just caught a glimpse of the spaceport collapsing into a vortex, sinking into the Europan sea. Fortunately, the geyser could no longer reach them, and they continued the journey safely. Ms Trudder wiped her forehead and looked out of the window; Augusta patted her husband's hand, and the girls exchanged glances and smiled. Only Chad was sitting motionlessly, his face whiter than before.

'What's the matter, mate?' Don asked. 'It's all over.'

It took a minute for Chad to reply.

'I'm going to kill you. I'm going to kill you all.'

They'd just escaped a geyser that inexplicably erupted from the ocean of the geologically inactive Europa, when Chad–the guy who loved beer, women and life, and wore a t-shirt that read "mate," a pathetic double entendre of self-definition and favourite pastime–sitting unnaturally erect and white, announced that he was going to kill them all by having the ship trapped in the gravitational pull of Jupiter and burning it up in its thick atmosphere.

He held a small packet in his hand. 'Stay where you are. Trudder, you switch the ship to manual. If you don't do all as told, I'm going to use this. Your choice.'

'What's that?' Chastity asked hardly audibly.

'c-jcjoloolc-,' Ms Trudder replied.

'What?'

‘The Europan equivalent of TNT,’ said Sarah instead of the guide. ‘They use it in mines to blow the rock up into manageable pieces.’

‘Yes,’ Ms Trudder confirmed without looking up. ‘You’re a very clever lady, Ms Brown. I – I just want to say I’m glad you’re here. Of course I don’t mean that-’

‘Cut the crap and do it!’ Chad snapped.

‘How harmful is that thing?’ John asked, still holding the hand of his elderly wife.

‘Not very bad out of water,’ Ms Trudder continued, as if Chad wasn’t there at all. ‘But it releases a toxic gas. So I guess it’s pretty dangerous after all.’ Her voice was calm and reassuring. Somehow she seemed prepared. ‘Chad–that’s your first name, right? I hope you don’t mind me addressing you like that, but you know, right, that you’ll also die?’

‘Of course I know. Now switch the pilot to manual and change the coordinates, or I’m setting this thing off.’ And with that, he flicked a red handle protruding from the device.

‘Don’t! Please…’ Chastity whimpered. ‘Why do you want to kill us?’

John jumped to his feet. ‘Isn’t there a radio on this damn thing? We can’t just sit here and let him do whatever he wants!’

‘The old man’s right,’ Chad said, pointing the device at Ms Trudder. ‘Switch off the radio. No tricks. I’m not that dumb. Now stand up and do it. And you,’ he said to John, ‘you just sit down, or you’re dead with your pretty wife.’

John slowly sat down again. Ms Trudder rose, and with Chad right behind her, walked to the controls. The red panic button was flashing leisurely in the middle of the panel.

‘You touch that button, and you know what happens. They say the gas isn’t quick. It’s a slow, painful, but certain death.’

With hands slightly shaking, she pushed the main radio switch to the off position, and disconnected the autopilot. Its voice boomed into the cabin.

‘Manual control activated. Good-bye.’

‘This is the ship speaking,’ said another, synthesized voice. ‘Route has been deleted. Please give new destination.’

‘Forty-four, thirty-two, seventeen,’ Chad said.

‘Give us a little time to say good-bye,’ Ms Trudder begged him.

‘And alert the universals. No. Enter the code.’

‘What was it again?’

Chad did not reply.

‘I’m sorry, what are the coordinates?’

Ms Trudder heard a thump behind her. It was Chad. He fell flat on his back, dropping the c-jcjoloolc-, which slid on the floor to the rear end of the cabin. Sarah jumped up and grabbed it before it hit the wall.

It was John who had the gun.

‘I got him in the leg. He should be all right if we have something to dress the wound.’

But Chad wasn’t screaming. He didn’t seem to notice the pain. ‘You desecrated our city and abused our buildings,’ he murmured under his breath. ‘You deserve to die.’ Lying in a puddle of water, he slowly closed his eyes. The puddle grew, and the water soaked his clothes.

Don went over to the body, bent down, and checked the pulse.

‘I think he’s dead,’ he said.

‘But I only shot him in the leg!’ John protested. ‘That couldn’t have killed him!’

‘And he’s not bleeding. It’s just water coming out of him,’ Ms Trudder murmured, then she suddenly raised her voice. ‘Ahem! Well, I guess I’ll switch everything back on again.’ She was already tweaking the controls when Sarah stood up with the c-jcjoloolc- in her hand.

‘Stop right there, Trudder. Get away from that.’

Ms Trudder held her hands up in the air. ‘What now?’

‘I’m finishing what that dumbass started.’

‘Who?’

‘That! Over there! The bloody idiot who couldn’t tell a spaceship from a snow globe!’

‘You mean you’re going to kill us like Chad?’

‘Yes.’

‘No kidding.’

But Sarah did not reply.

‘All right,’ Ms Trudder continued, ‘what do you want me to do?’

‘Get to the back. Over there. Not just you, everyone. Come on, people. Get up and move! Oh, and John, I have my middle finger on the security lock. If you shoot me as well, this thingy here automatically takes care of the rest.’

‘But, but…’ Charlotte started, ‘I thought you and me, I mean…’

‘Sorry, sweetie. This is important. Something you wouldn’t understand, you see?’

‘What’s important?’ Ms Trudder asked like a negotiator with her hands still in the air. The five of them flocked together in a corner, and Sarah stood triumphantly in the middle.

‘Oh, you haven’t figured it out, Ms Brains, have you?’

‘No,’ Ms Trudder replied, trying to sound as submissive as possible.

‘Oh God, you’ve spent ages on this moon, and you don’t know shit about it! You and your mates! What’s important? I’ll tell you. C-ui-’, she gurgled, and spat out a mouthful of water. Don looked at the others. Sarah wiped her mouth and continued. ‘Europa’s important. The Sphere’s important. It should’ve been left empty! That’s how it’s used. But no, you and your dumbfuck friends had to put an office in there.’

‘And? What else?’ Ms Trudder inquired as if they were chatting away above two steaming cuppa.

‘And the library. Removing all the coils…’

‘Sorry,’ interrupted Chastity, as Jon wiped the moist off his forehead. ‘Did you say the sphere is used? I thought…’

‘You think too much,’ Sarah snapped. ‘Especially for someone of your hair.’

‘Oh just cut that and get on with it!’ Jon gurgled. ‘Look at what they’ve done to the Palace! Putting candies in the Throne, and building toilets over the entrance!’

‘What on earth happened to you, dear?’ Augusta asked, looking at Jon as if she’d never seen him before. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Of course I am!’ Jon shouted, pointing the gun, without even looking, at his wife. ‘Excuse me…’ and he blew his nose into a tissue that immediately turned into a handful of pulp with the fluid that flowed out of the orifices.

‘Entrances?’ asked Charlotte, feeling less and less in danger as the situation around her started to become farcical. ‘Those wormholes in the palace were entrances? But for whom?’

‘For the Europans,’ Ms Trudder replied. ‘They are very flexible and swift. They can be thin like a thread, going through the narrowest gaps, but can also be strong and powerful.’

‘But they aren’t able to move with anything in their way, can they?’ Don asked.

‘No,’ Sarah replied quickly as the conversation was getting out of her hands. ‘They’d knock everything over. That’s why everything’s supposed to be empty and smooth. You know what you idiots call the Great Exhibition is? Hm?’

‘A warehouse,’ said Augusta, burying her face in her furrowed, shaky hands. Her voice sounded empty but reassured.

‘Exactly. They brought there all the stuff they didn’t need. And you thought it was an exhibition.’

Surprised, Jon looked at his wife. ‘How do you know?’

Augusta slowly looked up. Her face was covered in tears.

‘But what do they look like?’ Charlotte asked. ‘And how come I’m the only one who doesn’t seem to know a thing about all this?’

Ms Trudder raised her arm, and extended her index finger towards the girl. A small droplet of water glittered under her nail. ‘What do we look like? We’re formless. We’re the movement. We’re the water that flows, and the force that keeps the world in motion.’

Charlotte wiped her forehead. When she replied, her voice was calm. ‘You don’t need to tell me that, u-c-nojc-. I thought you’d go for the tall one.’

‘Five minutes until gravitational lockdown,’ announced the ship. Jupiter’s Great Red Spot already glared through the windows.

‘What’s going on?’

‘I did set the course to hurl the ship into Jupiter,’ replied Ms Trudder. ‘That’s how I wanted to kill you. I mean them.’

‘I just wanted to shoot them all,’ laughed what used to be John.

‘I also wanted to use c-jcjoloolc-,’ said Sarah’s body, taking another box of the explosive out of her bag, ‘but obviously cjl-ujoiol had the same idea. I guess he thought the gas would be too slow, that’s why he went for that hijacking thing.’ She glanced at Ms Trudder. ‘I guess you got there first.’

Ms Trudder’s eyes surveyed the whole group. ‘So we’re all…?’ They looked at each other uneasily. She continued. ‘So we’re all here to destroy the intruders?’

The expression darkened on John’s face. ‘It seems so, yes.’

They saw Sarah cursing silently. ‘Damn! I’ve come here to do away with them all.’

‘So have we, I guess,’ the thing in Ms Trudder said. ‘Can we get who was inside that Chad together?’

‘cjl-ujoiol will be all right if we get back under the crust again.’

‘Four minutes to gravitational lockdown,’ said the ship, as emotionlessly as if it was announcing tomorrow’s tidal forecast. Ms Trudder jumped to the controls, and pulled a lever.

‘OK, where should we go?’

‘Home,’ John said.

‘No,’ interposed Sarah. ‘We came here to give our lives to the cause. We can’t go home. We’d look ridiculous.’

‘There’s no cause any more. They’re dead, sugarplum,’ Charlotte said in a down-to-earth manner.

Sarah got impatient. ‘You don’t get it. It’s the principle. If you set out to sacrifice yourself for the protection of your planet, you can’t just go home and say mission accomplished.’

‘Why not?’

‘For jovesake we’re drifting!’ yelled Ms Trudder. ‘Make up your minds!’

‘Well, I‘m not going home.’

olol was not very good at controlling John, but he managed to turn his head toward the girl. ‘Look here, cjoii-oi, it’s even better if you could defeat the enemy without having to sacrifice yourself. It shows how pathetic they are. They need you down there.’

‘A pathetic enemy?’ Sarah shrieked. ‘Is a fucking victory over a bunch of nitwits supposed to be more heroic than over an enemy that can actually fight? You think that’s going to make me feel better?’

‘She might be right,’ Charlotte said. ‘We can’t let them know that we were so dumb to get into each and every one of them to get rid of the rest.’

‘Well, I want to go home,’ olol replied. ‘And if I can, I want to save cjl-ujoiol, too. Look at that puddle! How can you just stand there and not want to do something about him?’

‘He’s the lucky one,’ Sarah replied. ‘He got what he wanted. I didn’t.’

‘Well, if you’re not coming home, you can just step outside and evaporate.’

‘If she opens the lock, we’re all going to evaporate,’ noted Ms Trudder.

Don was just sitting at the back. He was grateful that they seemed to have forgotten him. He didn’t want to kill anyone. He didn’t even want to hurt anyone. Let alone die.

He wondered whether he’d also been overtaken by an Europan. And then he wondered how much time he had left to find out. Having no idea what to do, he just sat there counting the seconds until the point when the engines of the ship would be too weak to fight against the gravitational pull of the gas giant.

His shoes somehow began to feel strange. Forcing his finger inside the vamp he found out why. His socks were soaking wet.